DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 431 682 SO 030 833

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TITLE	Comparative Studies in Education.
PUB DATE	1998-00-00
NOTE	11p.
PUB TYPE	Information Analyses (070)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS	Comparative Analysis; *Comparative Education; Educational Benefits; Elementary Secondary Education; Foreign Countries; Higher Education; Research Methodology; *Scholarship
IDENTIFIERS	*Comparison Process; Research Trends

ABSTRACT

Comparative education has evolved from localized settings into international or global views. History, politics, sociology, and literature all become involved when comparisons of education are discussed. Almost all forms of research use comparisons in their framework. It was found that many of the comparisons have been too narrow in scope with information developed from single-level approaches. Research has moved from single-level approach into multilevel, at a slower pace and with resistance from the research and education communities. There is a need for multilevel comparisons giving researchers a broader approach than single-level comparisons. There are distinct benefits resulting from utilization of this more comprehensive comparison approach. Information gained from cross-national comparisons by specialists in fields other than education provides data showing diversity among various levels. Three objectives could be met to benefit students: (1) increased access in poor and minority areas to achieve universal education; (2) enhanced quality in all levels of education; and (3) improved efficiency in education by improvement of education management at multiple levels. Contains 19 references. (Author/BT)

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ED 431 682

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Education 503

Spring 1998 (c)

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SO 030 833

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Abstract

Comparative education has evolved from localized settings into international or global views. History, politics, sociology, and literature all become involved when comparisons of education are discussed. Almost all forms of research use comparisons in their framework. This researcher found many of the comparisons have been too narrow in scope with information developed from single level approaches. Some research has moved from single level approach into multilevel, at a slower pace and resistance from the research and education communities. This paper addresses the need for multilevel comparisons giving researchers a wider approach than single-level comparisons. It will highlight the benefits resulting from utilization of this more comprehensive comparison approach.

Comparative Studies in Education

Background

Wragg (1996) says "Attempts have been made to classify education through comparative studies in a variety of countries. These attempts have failed to consider differences in syllabi and goals while the lack of clarity concerning the education policy only serves to confuse teachers. First-hand classroom observation is more useful in determining how various techniques stand internationally because more is learned about the actual performance and its consequences. Pacific Rim math education, for example, produces better scores but it also undercuts imagination, limiting students as adults." Stevenson & Lee (1989) disagree as illustrated in their video, *The Polished Stones.* Viewers watched teachers in Pacific Rim countries with students working to develop a better understanding of math without embarrassment.

Despite a wide range of research methods used in the past, the problem persists as researchers try to find methods that provide the most accurate results. It is assumed that certain shared characteristics (history, cultural origins, language and economics) may differentiate one region of the world from another when studying educational methods. When researchers of cross-regional comparisons take this approach, they face three major challenges in convincing their readers of their findings. They must show readers that similar characteristics are truly shared by members of the regions being studied; demonstrate that two or more regions are substantially similar or different in their unifying features; and lastly, that any similarities or differences are of educational importance. Convincing readers that characteristics cited are consistent with other members of the region is the most

difficult problem.

In the field of educational studies, comparative education has been defined in diverse ways. For the purpose of this paper, comparative education refers to studies that research differences or similarities between two or more areas relating to the exchange of knowledge. This research has revealed that particular levels are more common than others.

Comparative Levels

When using the global or world comparison level, a major assumption is that certain shared characteristics differentiate one global region from another in important educational ways. Statistics from a study (Kamens and Benavot 1992) of official school curricula illustrates that over time, official attention to the topics of science and mathematics grows in all regions with the exception of Eastern Europe where trends are uneven. They recognize that previous scholarship "suggests that the content of school curricula is related systematically to political, cultural and economic characteristics of each nation" (p. 118).

Country level, is common in the field of comparative education. Emphasis has been on cross-national comparison of systems since the early works in the field by Bereday (1964) and Kandel (1933). Tilak (1994) states "literacy rates in many countries are higher in urban than in rural areas. However, rural/urban and regional differences are not revealed by these national aggregates" (p. 44). UNESCO (1984) is just one international agency that publishes information on a country basis where textbooks present information in this format and subheadings are standardized with allotment of pages uniform.

This could be misleading since many countries do not have a central government policy that influences a national education system, such as India. Their decentralized

education system places more importance on their state government than the national government policies. Strong determiners of the type of textbooks used may be dependent upon the international forces of traditions, publishers, and methods for examinations rather than on the policies of governments. On a more positive note, many of these reports contain instructive information. It is correct, therefore, to present some information in this manner since many countries have a national education system that is strongly influenced by central government policies.

Comparisons at the state/province level are highly important in countries such as Canada, India, Germany and the United States. In these countries, there is strong control over many areas of education, such as minimum qualifications for teachers, curriculum, and the basic structure of education.

A study of financial arrangements in Canada (Lawton, 1987) demonstrates the diversity of Canada. He observed dramatic variations in the methods by which elementary and secondary schools were financed in each of the ten provinces and two territories. He also noted that provincial governments had divergent policies with regard to Catholic and other church schools. Here in the United States each state has control over its teachers, curriculum and the basic structure of education. Virginia's Standards of Learning (Commonwealth of Virginia, 1995) provide a detailed guide for the educators of Virginia in planning curriculum by subject and grade level.

An example of district level comparison is a study of basic education in three counties in China (Lewin & Wang, 1994). The rationale for the study was that "national statistics on basic education are an unsatisfactory guide to policy and decision making in

China. Though the overall picture of impressive achievement appears largely justified, we are aware that aggregated statistics at the national-level may be unreliable." (p. 1).

This type of study does not allow for insights that can be obtained from a local level case study. At this level decisions are made which could affect enrollment, drop-outs, teaching quality, resources and, student achievement. Since different policies for educational administration and management are needed for each type of local situation, aggregate data would not provide this information.

Literature that uses schools as the unit of analysis is usually different from others which focus on higher levels. A study by Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore and Ouston (1979) in their book *Fifteen Thousand Hours*, studied the school as the unit of analysis. The researchers wished to "investigate, among other questions, whether it mattered *which* school the children attended, and, if so, what features of schools made a difference in terms of academic achievement and social development". They selected twelve schools in inner London examining characteristics of each institution. They concluded each school had its own ecologies. (p. 182). The study identified a form of institutional culture that was of considerable importance both to the nature of education and to the broader shaping of society. The use of higher or lower units would probably have not identified such importance. This level utilizes random sampling not as easily possible at the higher levels.

Classroom level comparisons have been used by sociologists when looking at social systems, allowing for views of how students interact with each other and with teachers. On the sociology of education, Boocock (1980) is typical of comparisons of classrooms focused on factors such as student population, size, patterns of communication and rewards. In his

book, the similarities and contrasts across different levels of analysis are shown to generate different insights. Similarities relate to the people at each level who relate to each other in predictable ways according to their society. Contrasts develop from the blending of societies at different levels and the interactions taking place. This level of comparison permits the population to understand the reasons for behavior of all, including themselves, as they operate in the classroom.

The last level of comparison is on individuals. This level usually emphasizes psychology although it could have many other orientations. Biggs and Moore (1993) illustrated this level in their chapter on students' approaches to learning. They contrast Student A, who is motivated to learn, has a deep approach to learning, and gets fully involved with the topic, with Student B, who wants to have fun, has a surface approach to learning, and decides to do the minimal amount, and Student C, who wants top marks, has an achieving approach to learning, and uses time effectively (p. 306). This level has been used for investigation and research more than any other level in comparative studies. It is the most personalized level and makes it possible to develop comparisons that are easier for teachers to utilized in planning for their students.

Inter-American Development Bank (1997) states "that from a microeconomic standpoint, when individuals acquire more education they can assimilate information more efficiently and thus benefit public leaders. They have better communication skills and are more adaptable to making changes thus helping to solve problems in the production field. These better educated workers are able to solve and complete more difficult and complex projects thus improving the economic output for their countries" (p. 4).

Conclusion

Comparative studies opens the door to the world. Most research in the field has focused on global and country bases. In single levels, the focus is limited and lacks a dimension accomplished with a multilevel approach. It is important to mention that the use of single level is valuable to the study of comparative education. Data from all research can be useful in assuring the flow of high quality graduates to the growing economy of the world. A changing economic and political environment needs constant review to assure adequate education anywhere in the world. One using this information, however, must recognize its limitations and consider alternative perspectives when making interpretations. Multilevel eliminates lack of an international dimension, provides cross-national data, and a wider range of information. This variety provides readers with data they can interpret and utilize for their particular needs. Information gained from cross-national comparisons by specialists in fields other than education, provides data showing diversity among various levels. Three objectives could be met to benefit students; increased access in poor and minority areas to achieve universal education; enhanced quality in all levels of education; and improved efficiency in education by improvement of education management at multiple levels. This researcher is convinced that the use of a multilevel approach in comparative education will provide a wider focus and, therefore, more comprehensive, useable, and accurate information.

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